

## **Proposed process and envisaged proposal call aimed at upgrading Die Braak:**

### **Submission to Stellenbosch Municipality by the Stellenbosch Heritage Foundation, Visit Stellenbosch and Partners**

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#### **Introduction**

At the Stellenbosch Municipality Council meeting of 27 March 2019, the Council considered a process plan for a Proposal Call aimed at the upgrading of Die Braak. Council authorised the Municipal Manager to initiate a 90-day public participation process prior to embarking on a Proposal Call. Municipal Official Notice 31/2019 called for those interested or affected to provide written inputs to the Manager: Local Economic Development by 30 July 2019.

This submission is led by the Stellenbosch Heritage Foundation and Visit Stellenbosch, together with a long list of partners that support the core approach and principles of the submission. (We intend to enter into formal agreements and to establish a special purpose vehicle if the public participation process leads to a Proposal Call. More than fifty individuals in organisations have expressed tentative interest and support to establish a special purpose vehicle for Die Braak and its surroundings...

In essence, our submission argues for a dedicated agency of interested and affected parties – in partnership with the Municipality – to lead the re-imagining, re-making, and management of Die Braak and surrounds with a view to the precinct contributing meaningfully to the current-day needs of Stellenbosch.

In response to the emphasis of the Council notice – a process for guiding the redevelopment of Die Braak – we focus on process issues for upgrading Die Braak. We also raise aspects of design that should be integrally part of the process.

As indicated in the municipality's 2014 Local Economic Development Strategy and 2016/ 17 IDP, the productive use of Die Braak Area can meet a number of strategic objectives, including strengthening the municipal and regional competitive advantage for sustained growth and broadening citizen participation in the economy.

#### **Die Braak: past and present**

Over centuries, Die Braak functioned as a central village space in Stellenbosch, the focus of communal events, both intermittent and those earmarking special cultural events, celebrations, and remembrance. Historic documents ranging over three centuries depict this accepted use and status of the space. No suggestions were made to use the Braak differently or to develop it during all those years. No document pleading for the preservation of the Braak has been recorded either, which indicates that the townspeople had taken its use and value as granted. Long before the institution of heritage laws, the Braak therefore was protected by villagers' daily use of the space.

Today, the status of Die Braak is less obvious. For some, it is a place best to be avoided, albeit historically meaningful. For others, it is a place to trade, to take shelter at night, or even to engage in what is generally regarded as socially unacceptable.

Die Braak could be described as a “lost” or “loose” space; politically contested and lacking a clear use, meaning, and a commonly agreed understanding of behaviour expected in its use.

The problem of lost or loose public space is a general urban challenge today. In a process of interdependent events and actions, the private vehicle; zoning policy; a shift in the balance between private and public interests; as well as changes in land use in the inner cities; have resulted in the loss of meaning that were traditionally associated with urban open space. Loss of meaning leads to loss of behaviours, norms and rules traditionally attached to human space, in turn to “looseness” or opportunity for other behaviours too manifest.

New behaviour and use is often positive; including the creative use of underutilised space for culture or counterculture activities, activism, or community use (i.e. food gardens). Yet, looseness can also harbour abuse of different kinds, and as a result, contestation and conflict.

Die Braak appears to be at a stage where much of its previous use is lost. During the day, it is essentially a traffic circle, cut off from public use in surrounding areas. At night, and especially over weekends, it is not always safe. In use and state, Die Braak and surrounds belies its status as a core protected heritage resource.<sup>1</sup>

If Die Braak's use as a village space cannot be discovered afresh, no architectural or other embellishment will prevent further decay. Heritage rules may stay change but cannot prevent disuse and decline.

## **The opportunity**

The opportunity is to re-establish Die Braak as a valued public space in Stellenbosch town. The context of a diverse community, rapid change, democracy, universal rights, deep need for livelihood opportunity among many, and a free market economy, this is complex. Yet, it could also energise the town.

Much of the deliberations about securing the maintenance of Die Braak and optimising its use over the past 10 years have focused on aspects of establishing a tourism and cultural precinct or node. This is aligned to international best practice; many cities world-wide have recognised the significance of tourism and cultural precincts as a means to extend local opportunity - of various kinds - attract out of town spending, enable urban renewal, and maintain buildings and places of historic value.

For Die Braak, many views and needs are to be considered. It is advisable to progress with care. With this in mind, we explore **key process issues** and offer **core principles** that could guide the redefinition and development of Die Braak.

## **Section 1: Key process issues and principles**

### **What is the essential quality that should drive the process?**

The process to upgrade Die Braak should be inclusive and cohesive. The Municipality's call for interested or affected parties to provide written inputs on the process is a good start.

Inclusivity and cohesiveness have a number of dimensions beyond asking for process inputs. At its core, the process should seek a function, form, and "life" for Die Braak that has meaning to all citizens, sectors of society, and visitors. This has specific implications for the use, design, making, and management of the space.

No amount of aesthetic upgrading, landscaping, or beatification of the space will be enough. The space needs to be considered in all its dimensions and be made to assume meaning to all of society. Some may come to respect it because it provides livelihood opportunity or improve business conditions. Others may be taken by the way it recognises history and culture, both old and new. Then, more may just enjoy it because it provides a safe place to retreat from commercial or work space over a lunch time, to sit and watch passers-by and town life.

The upgrading of Die Braak should also be spatially inclusive and cohesive. It is the place where many routes – both vehicular and pedestrian – meet. With implementation of the proposed Adam Tas Corridor project, we believe that this centrality will be further strengthened as the west of town is integrated with the east and Die Braak and surrounds become the "seam" between a new and the older town.

This development renders Die Braak and areas next to Die Braak ideal for public uses, those attracting large numbers of citizens and providing public services. It also implies that further development of the route network in town should specifically consider how networks – and specifically pedestrian networks – converge on Die Braak.

Inclusion and cohesiveness also mean that Die Braak will renew within the context of the surrounding spaces in the town centre, such as the Rhenish complex, Meulplein and Church Street.

## What should the area be used for?

A ground rule for urban space is that it should be used; if not used, it deteriorates, and its value is lost. It is a matter of use it or lose the use of it. If an area is not in general use, if there are not enough eyes and ears to ensure that it is safe for the elderly and for children, it will attract people who challenge social norms.

Critical also is that Die Braak should enable different uses, both permanent and intermittent. This recognises our open society, an inclusive concept of citizenship, and, in turn, collective meaning for the space, shared respect, and continuous activity (throughout the year and the day) ensuring safety and suitable behaviour.

As arguably the most important “shared” space in Stellenbosch, Die Braak and surrounds appears appropriate to be the place where government meets the people; where information is provided and shared, a future focus for information related to community programmes aimed at enabling opportunity for citizens.

Given the large number of local and foreign visitors to Stellenbosch – and the growing significance of tourism to many aspects of the local economy and in citizens’ livelihood strategies – it would be appropriate for Die Braak to house the local tourism office. Similarly, information offices of other institutions and organisations representing the essence of Stellenbosch (e.g. educational institutions) could be accommodated here.

Die Braak should provide for large gatherings, occasions when many people can come together to attend an event. A large part of it should therefore be retained as an open and unobstructed space, enabling unimpeded pedestrian gathering and movement.

The space should strengthen an environment attractive for business, both formal and informal. In this regard, it could also provide parking – a critical need in the town centre for business success – but accommodated underground, not competing with the core characteristic of urban public space at ground level favouring primarily pedestrian movement and use.

Formal businesses should remain to be accommodated along the edges of Die Braak but encouraged to accommodate people-centred uses along edges of the space. A good example is Checkers, where the owners should be encouraged to reconfigure the building accommodation to contain people-focused restaurant/ café type space along the southern edge of Die Braak, adjoining the Rhenish church and Meulsloot.

Informal business opportunity – in high pedestrian traffic areas – is critical, including the provision of service infrastructure for traders (cover, electricity, water, storage, and so on). The accommodation of underground parking provides an excellent opportunity for also providing storage and servicing space required by informal traders, event managers, and so on in an unobtrusive manner.

Future use of the Rhenish Complex is critical to the role and sustainability of Die Braak as a valued communal space in Stellenbosch. The land comprising the complex was acquired by the Rhenish Mission Society in the first half of the 19th century. Most of the buildings are indicated on the 1817 town plan. The Rhenish Parsonage is used as a toy museum and the Rhenish Institute accommodates the P.J. Olivier Art Museum. The Stellenbosch Tourist Information Centre is located Market Street. The Old Mill garden area is used as a carpark for Checkers. The complex is owned by the Municipality of Stellenbosch and the Western Cape Government.

A number of municipally initiated and supported studies and development frameworks have focused on the complex and its surrounds, including the “Stellenbosch Conservation Strategy and Development Guidelines” (1997), “The Mill Square and Surroundings Proposed Public Structure and Development Framework” (1998), “Die Meulsloot upgrading proposals” (1999), and the “Binnetuin Park Heritage Study” (2005). In December 2014, Heritage Western Cape approved the heritage survey for central Stellenbosch. The Rhenish complex (together with Die Braak and other adjacent buildings) were graded as a “Grade 1 National Heritage Landscape”, the only of its kind in the Stellenbosch region.<sup>2</sup>

The Rhenish complex already contains the pre-conditions for a significant cultural precinct and associated regeneration. These include highly valued historic buildings and spaces in an accessible location to all citizens and visitors, and a range of space options, open and enclosed, large and small, and varying in its degree of public exposure or privacy.

Despite this considerable focus, the Rhenish complex possibly remains the most neglected and underutilised heritage asset in Stellenbosch. Notwithstanding its central location, and varied spaces, large and small, public and more secluded, few citizens have reason – or are encouraged – to go there.

Ideally, future use of the Rhenish complex should be planned in parallel with Die Braak.

### **What is the appropriate spatial planning and design focus of the initiative?**

As indicated above, Die Braak is part of the larger context of spaces and their use in the town centre and should be utilised as such. Spatially, Die Braak remains a central space, and with the implementation of the Adam Tas Corridor project, its centrality and location in a seam between old and new will be strengthened.

A brief review of suggestions for upgrading Die Braak from the past three decades have revealed three broad design approaches, summarised below:

#### **Traditional Cape**

Hannes Meiring, well-known Stellenbosch architect and artist, and Ron Kirby, former head of architecture at Wits, both suggested accentuating Die Braak by means of a low white ring wall. A proposal by the artist Strijdom van der Merwe fits in with the above suggestions. These and other suggestions arising from the traditional Cape approach will visually round off a neglected space. Research regarding recommendations by Meiring and others points out that such a wall may have a negative connotation for many people as a form of exclusion on the one hand and, on the other, that it would visually emphasise the use of Die Braak as a “traffic circle”. The proposals concerning Traditional Cape do not materially address the actual use of the space.<sup>3</sup>

#### **Contemporary iconic**

In 2012, Ryckeboer and Carton, following a study project through the Artesis Hogeschool in Antwerp, Belgium (with the full cooperation of the Municipality and the Stellenbosch Heritage Foundation) and interactive sessions in the neighbourhoods of Stellenbosch, developed eight design suggestions for Die Braak. Their proposal is for the tarred surfaces to the south and to the west to be replaced with paving that would allow grass to grow. This will reduce the visual impact of Die Braak as a traffic circle while allowing access to cars, but without visually demarcated preference for cars. This approach is intended to encourage pedestrian use of Die Braak by establishing the office for tourism and possibly also some public communication functions of the municipality in underground spaces below Die Braak, using a minimalist iconic entrance above the ground (with reference to Mies van der Rohe's Farnsworth House or IM Pei's entry to the Louvre).<sup>4</sup>

#### **Contextual re-use**

A number of studies (inter alia by Martin Kruger, Penny Pistorius and Stewart Harris, and Stephen Boshoff) emphasise the interdependence and links between Die Braak and the buildings and gardens of the Rhenish complex, Church Street, and Meulplein. All suggest opening the spaces around the historic Rhenish church and the Meulsloot and unlocking new opportunities through redevelopment of the Checkers centre and the municipal parking lot behind the centre. They want to encourage increased public use of and pedestrian traffic on Die Braak by allowing hotels and office facilities in the buildings along the space, as well as tourism offices and certain communication functions of the Municipality.

In 2014, international and local urban design professionals, taking part in a design charrette focused on the Rhenish complex and Church Street (as part of the 14th International Winelands Conference and 1<sup>st</sup> Urban Design Institute of South Africa Conference), made similar recommendations.<sup>5</sup>

#### **Summary: spatial use and design focus**

We believe that elements of each of these approaches could work well, provided that the greater coherence of spaces is respected. We also believe that these design proposals can be implemented within the context of Die Braak's status as a graded heritage landscape. Both the old and new can be incorporated in a robust framework accommodating current-day needs.

All three of the approaches could accommodate underground parking under Die Braak, if or when it is necessary, within the context of a coordinated plan for the Middledorp.

An inclusive and cohesive vision and plan for the upgrading of Die Braak will involve many elements and varied building work. We do not believe it necessary for the whole of such a proposal to be implemented at the same time. It could be phased, as long as a larger plan integrating different elements is adhered to.

Within the focus of inclusion, it is critical that the upgrading of Die Braak is designed for diversity. This would include – over and above both formal and informal opportunity to strengthen business – providing in the needs of:

- Children.
- Group events.
- The disabled and physically challenged (emphasising overcoming the physical barriers that impede or limit access to the area to this group).

As a multifunctional space – and one which should accommodate change over time – it is important that Die Braak is not over-designed, limiting creative use or new uses in future which cannot necessarily be foreseen today.

Critically, the space should be planned and designed for maintenance. Simple solutions should be emphasised, materials which are durable, easy to replace if needed, and climatologically adequate and appropriate. Lighting of the space will be critical to ensure safe use at all hours.

## **Section 2: How should the space be managed?**

Successful urban public space must be used and managed. The process must give appropriate consideration to how the space is to be made safe, activities regulated, and the space maintained and safeguarded from misuse. <sup>6</sup> Rethinking the management and use of Die Braak Area presents a unique opportunity for Stellenbosch to merge older and new development agendas and to bring available competency and energy to bear on remaining historic assets to create a new tourism node or "hotspot" for the town.

Reinstating Die Braak and surrounds as a valued, inclusive, and cohesive space in Stellenbosch town will require dedicated human and financial resources. Given resource constraints within the Municipality, it is unlikely that the Municipality can dedicate full time professionals (with different expertise) and the financial resources to undertake the project. Morally, it would be difficult to justify that the Municipality – with its varied and deep citizen needs spread over a large area – should be primarily responsible for addressing the needs of one area in the Stellenbosch CBD. This is especially so given that private business is set to benefit considerably from the scheme.

Globally, the value of core public spaces and landscapes in historic towns and cities are most effectively unlocked in public-private partnerships or through independent agencies which manage it on behalf of and in close cooperation with the local authorities. The evidence for such alliances is ample across thriving, liveable towns and cities everywhere. These partnerships are typically organised so that each of the participants - public and private - take responsibility for what they do best, which produces an efficient management structure and ideally the one with the most value.

Should it be agreed that it is best to undertake upgrading of Die Braak in an inclusive and cohesive manner, involving surrounding areas, the case for a public-private partnership is stronger. Such an initiative will require considerable integration and coordination of work affecting a range of interests and landowners at all stages of the project; a full-time endeavour requiring dedicated resources.<sup>7</sup>

Well known for the success of its public-private partnership is Central Park in New York. In the sixties and through to the seventies, Central Park decayed. Neglected surfaces, crumbling statues, graffiti and gates locked at sunset were amongst the visible symptoms of underlying class, racial and ethnic tensions. In 1980, the Central Park Conservancy took over management of the park and over the following thirty years raised more than \$500 million and activated hundreds of volunteers and organisations to restore the park.

Crimes committed in the park immediately declined from 731 in 1981 to 37 in 2001, to 17 in 2014 and to fewer than 10 in 2018. Use of the park in all the areas and activities measured in this period increased dramatically.

The time and money it took to change Central Park is not available locally, but also not necessary to improve Die Braak and other public spaces in the Middedorp of Stellenbosch. Much less would be needed in Stellenbosch.

Various special interest organisations and businesses have made progress to establish dedicated development and urban management capacity for the Stellenbosch Central Business District uniquely related to its historic nature and tourism attractiveness. In many ways it is attention different from that required in the rest of the Municipality, both in nature and intensity.

An organisation dedicated to the well-being of the Middedorp and all its users, will be ideally placed to manage, execute, and maintain an upgraded Die Braak and surrounds in partnership with the Municipality and other agencies.

Albeit we believe that the proposed dedicated development and urban management agency for the Stellenbosch Central Business District will be ideally placed to manage, execute, and maintain an upgraded Braak, we would be happy to respond to a Proposal Call.

Should the Municipality decide to proceed with a Proposal Call, we would suggest that respondents specifically be required to address the following issues:

- Who the respondent represents.
- The overall approach to the upgrading process.
- The professional and financial resources dedicated to the process (in all phases from design to management of the area.
- The process to be followed (with particular emphasis on community participation).

The process of reviving Die Braak and surrounding areas requires a long-term plan with clear outcomes and a commercial mindset to ensure sustainability.

The first important step is the establishment of an independent development agency tasked with immediate and direct action on the ground - as outlined earlier in this proposal. This approach has worked in conceptualising, planning and mobilising the Adam Tas Corridor Project (ATC) which has garnered not only support, but buy-in and commitment from provincial and local government, Stellenbosch University and leading businesses in and around Stellenbosch. The progress made with ATC thus far was underpinned by the concept of "small massive change" which is recommended for Die Braak Area project as well: a practical, implementable and low-impact approach that can start quickly and scale to bigger things.

## **Conclusions**

Our proposal is an argument for revived use of the Braak through adapting it for present and future times. We argue that landscaping and similar interventions on the Braak will not adequately prevent neglect or decay, but that the use of the Braak is central to it becoming a lively, living public space once again.

Rather, it should be an inclusive and cohesive process, considering the needs of all citizens and Die Braak and its surrounds as an integrated precinct of different but interdependent places and activities.

The centrality of Die Braak will be further strengthened as the west of town is integrated with the east and Die Braak and surrounds become a seam between a new and older town. This renders the middedorp ideal for public uses. It also implies that further development of the route network in town should specifically consider how networks – including pedestrian networks – converge on Die Braak.

We argue that redevelopment around Die Braak and positioning the tourism office and certain functions of municipal interaction of the community on or next to the Braak could improve the daily use of the Braak as the core of this central space. We further argue that we cannot separate the use and the improvement of the Braak from the use and improvement of the Rhenish complex, and of other public spaces in the heart of the

Middelorp. The Braak and the Rhenish complex should be linked to the end of Church Street and the historic streets and gardens on the west, and also to the schools and Dorp Street at the southern end and Alexander Street at the Northern end.

We also argue that the value of core public spaces and landscapes in historic towns and cities are most effectively unlocked in public-private partnerships or through independent agencies which manage it on behalf of and in close cooperation with the local authorities. The proposed dedicated development and urban management agency for the Stellenbosch Central Business District will be ideally placed to manage, execute, and maintain an upgraded Braak.

***Imagine Die Braak ten years from now ...***

*“What once appeared to be a, ‘lost’ space in the heart of Stellenbosch town is now a choice destination; a vibrant expression of the best of the town’s history, its people and aspirations ...*

*The space and surrounding historic buildings are actively used for corporate offices, public exhibition places, facilities for artisan and crafts-people, learning and trading places. Many forms of cultural expression are noticeable, with a focus on the local and regional. It is the central place of Stellenbosch town, used for a multitude of public gatherings and festivals; it provides livelihood opportunities and is a platform to build community public places in other communities.*

*The municipality’s leadership established a stage where commitment to creative expression, cultural development and an open town is expressed on a daily basis. As a result new signature buildings, sensitive to the surrounding, has been developed, denser tourism and residential housing and more places of entertainment. Die Braak is at the core of a dynamic Middelorp.”*

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## Endnotes

1. As reported MatieMedia article quoted above, the Stellenbosch Information Centre “no longer direct tourists there”. Lauren Dold, The decline of Die Braak, MatieMedia, 26 June 2018 <https://www.matiemedia.org/the-decline-of-die-braak/> The article also states: In days gone by Die Braak was considered the town square or village green, a space of great pride...No more.
2. <http://www.stellenboschheritage.co.za/>
3. Images



Image: Strijdom van der Merwe



Image: Farnsworth House - Mies van der Rohe

#### 4. Images



Image: Entrance to Louvre IM Pei, Paris



Image: Historic Städel Museum, Frankfurt

## **5. Die Braak: Summary of working group proposals at International Planning & Urban Design Conference 2014.**

### **Group 1**

#### Constraints:

- East-West traffic flow
- Mega-block development has reduced permeability and movement
- No pedestrian access or permeability on the Western side
- Complex historical context

#### Opportunities:

- Use water, Meulsloot
- Historical context enriches environment
- Reintroduce former activities
- Use tourism to restructure and reactivate

### **Group 2**

- One side of the Braak is more active than the other; increase density on the less active side
- Create hard spaces
- Add connecting routes for pedestrians
- Encourage more doors and access to buildings that open onto the Braak

### **Group 3**

#### Assets:

- Preserve the space as a whole
- Water is an asset
- Reinforce tree lines
- Preserve heritage buildings
- Keep vistas of historic significance

#### Movement:

- Parking takes up too much space
- Remove circles in Bird Street
- Narrow road on Braak; two lanes instead of four
- Increase sidewalks
- Make Alexander Street part of the Braak
- Create pedestrian and symbolic routes
- Reinforce route from station to the Braak
- Pull pedestrian energy through to parking area behind Checkers
- Adapt Checkers building - open space to Rhenish Complex
- Re-establish link between Moederkerk and Rhenish Complex

## **6. Urban Public Space:**

In the first decade post 2000 the City of Cape Town implemented some 100 public space projects throughout the city. Many of these have fallen into neglect and misuse. The main reason for this is that at the time of implementation the City failed to reach agreement on appropriate management and maintenance arrangements for the spaces, including who will be responsible, how communities could be involved in caring for the spaces, and who will be responsible for funding.

## **7. An abundance of public private partnerships:**

Evidence from the hundred largest cities in the United States and hundreds more in Europe suggests that improvements to core public spaces are best achieved through partnership between independent agencies and the local authorities. There is much to learn from such experiences, from raising money to restore and maintain such spaces too staffing at night, and for programming and involving both "community anchors" and entire neighbourhoods. If the use and appearance of the Braak and related public spaces in the Middelorp of Stellenbosch is a success, it could lead to similar improvements in other neighbourhoods.

## **8. A Catalyst for job creation and economic development:**

In Stellenbosch, the tourism industry has many opportunities to grow. The benefits that could be derived in terms of employment, investment, and social and economic benefits to our community is significant.

The recent establishment of a new integrated Destination Marketing Organisation (DMO) – called Visit Stellenbosch – unites all stakeholders under a joint destination banner to grow the tourism economy in Stellenbosch for all. It is a much-needed undertaking to realise the significant potential of tourism for Stellenbosch.

In the Western Cape the total direct spend by international visitors (excluding capital spend) exceed R25 billion per year and foreign visitor arrivals at Cape Town International have reached more than 2 million. The industry is a major source of jobs and employs more than 225 000 people in the province - an increase of almost 30% over the past 5 years.

It therefore comes as no surprise that tourism-led growth forms a key pillar of the national government's economic development plan for job creation. In his SONA address in February 2019, President Cyril Ramaphosa announced an ambitious plan to dramatically expand this industry; "The Goal is to reach 21 million by 2030, up from 10 million in 2018".

At the very heart of the long-term plan of Visit Stellenbosch is a determined social development drive that is focussed on job creation and skills development. A very impressive target has been set by the board to create 5000 new tourism-led jobs in Stellenbosch in the next five years. The revival of the Braak Area can play in an important role to achieve this.